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ABSTRACT

A total of 225 mothers, ages 19 to 64, were asked how they felt about their children (N=309): (1) upon knowledge of pregnancy, (2) at the quickening, (3) at birth, and (4) at the time of the interview. Results contradict some of the rationale behind the current liberalized abortion arguments by showing that initially unwanted children are loved as much by their mothers as initially wanted children. While 8% of the mothers studied were most distressed, and 28% were ecstatic upon learning of pregnancy, maternal affection for the child grew with the quickening and increased by the time of birth. At the time of the interview, no differences were apparent between the two polar groups of mothers along the dimension of expressed love for the child. Other questions discussed include: (1) Do mothers favor the firstborn?; (2) Does the mother's age affect her affection for the child?; and (3) How do women usually feel when they discover they are pregnant? (Author/ST)

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Abstract: How does a mother's regard of her child relate to how she initially felt upon learning of her pregnancy? Two hundred twenty-five mothers aged 19 to 64 were asked how they felt about 309 of their children: (a) upon knowledge of pregnancy, (b) at the quickening, (c) at birth, and (d) at the time of interview. While 8% of the mothers were most distressed and 28% were ecstatic upon knowledge of pregnancy, maternal affection for the child grew with the quickening, and more so by birth, so that at the time of interview, no differences between these two polar groups of mothers along the dimension of expressed love for the child was apparent. At birth and at the time of interview, about one of every 20 mothers claimed a degree of affection of less than love for their child. Results were discussed in terms of the current liberalized abortion controversy.

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HOW MUCH DO MOTHERS LOVE THEIR CHILDREN?

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"There is nothing worse than an unwanted child" is a common motto of the pro-liberalized abortion campaign. Presumably the motto is not to be taken literally (some things must be worse), but is to be construed as "unwanted children are destined to have a much less satisfying life than children who are wanted." An important factor bearing on the life-satisfaction of a child is the affection he enjoys from his mother. If initially-unwanted children are held in lower regard by their mothers than initially-wanted children are held by their mothers, this circumstance would constitute a reason for their lives to be less enjoyable. But do mothers of initially-unwanted children love their children less and, if so, to what degree? How many children are born unwanted, and to what degree are children usually loved by mothers in our society? While the issue is of importance, and the questions of the sort often asked in ordinary and professional discourse, only the study of Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957) was found to bear directly on these topics; hence this report.

Method

We can determine the degree of affection or love that a person holds for another in basically two ways: (a) we can ask the person how he feels about the other, or (b) we can observe how the person treats the other person or the interests of the other person. Neither way is certain to generate the "truth." If we ask a person how he feels about another, he may simply lie; or perhaps be mistaken about how he feels. If we observe how a person treats another or the interests of another, we may find ourselves deceived

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by actions or we may incorrectly construe the meaning of many of the acts we observe. While both methods have their advantages and pitfalls, the first is certainly the less expensive and more direct; therefore, we employed it.

Two studies were performed. Both utilized the same questionnaire; however, some of the data of the first study were destroyed by an errant janitor before it could be completely analyzed. In the first study, 132 women were interviewed in shopping centers in and around Louisville and in urban parts of New Jersey. As it was hoped to generate normative results, strict area-probability samples in Louisville were first attempted. In spite of initially good rapport (potential respondents accepted the questionnaire in about two-thirds of the attempted interviews) and what appeared to be reasonable ways to assure anonymity, the highly personal nature of the questionnaire generated a refusal rate of over 95% under these circumstances. After 20 interview-hours of defeat, we tried administering the questionnaire in shopping centers to every kth mother who passed by. Our success was considerably better in this situation, with a rejection rate of less than 10%. The second study was performed in shopping centers and generated 93 respondents ranging in age from 19 to 64 with a rejection rate of less than 10%.

Respondents were informed of the status of the interviewer, the general purpose of the investigation "to find out how women feel about their children," and were told to fill out the questionnaire away from the interviewer and any other person, then to seal the completed questionnaire in the provided envelope, and return it to the interviewer. They were further assured that the interviewer would not personally open the envelope, and that only the senior investigator would record her answers and then would destroy

the questionnaire. Before being given the questionnaire, the woman was asked how many children she had; if she had only one, she filled out a questionnaire on the one, if she had three or more, a table of random numbers was used to select the child about whom she would answer the questionnaire. After she had completed the questionnaire, an additional child was randomly selected and she answered regarding this child.

The questionnaire asked for: (a) the age of the mother, (b) the age of the child, (c) religious preference, (d) when the subject felt that life began, (e) if she had ever had an abortion, (f) how she felt when she learned she was pregnant (I regreted it more than anything else/ I felt rather indifferent about it/ I was glad/ I wanted this child more than anything else), (g) how she felt at the point during pregnancy when life is felt by the mother (I felt deeper regret than that felt at the time of learning of my pregnancy/ I felt no difference in feelings/ My love for the child grew as my pregnancy evolved), (h) whether she had attempted to terminate the pregnancy, (i) if she would have had an abortion if it had been possible, (j) if she would have given the child up for adoption if she knew the child would be well cared-for, and (k) would she go through this pregnancy again if she had it to do over. She was then to pick the statement that best described her regard for her child at birth, and currently ("Upon the birth of my child, my overall feelings were: I loved him more than anyone else/ I loved him next-most to the one I love the very most/ I loved him more than most people I love/ I loved him about as much as most of those I love/ I loved him a little/ I liked him/ I felt rather indifferent toward him, but would help him in time of trouble/ I felt rather indifferent toward him/ I disliked him a little/ I disliked him/ I hated him a little/

I hated him/ I hated him more than most people I hate/ I hated him next most to the one I hate the most/ I hated him more than anyone else," while the same response choices were available, suitably modified for tense for "My overall feeling today toward my child is....").

Results

We interviewed 225 women concerning 309 of their children, and were able to analyze complete data from 93. The median age of the sample was 42.5 and ranged from 19 to 64 in age. Four of the 225 women claimed that they had had an abortion.

Data on regard toward wanted and unwanted children were provided by 93 women on 128 children. Twenty-nine of the mothers had one child, 27 had 2 children, 35 had 3, 17 had 4, 10 had 5, 2 had 7, 3 had 8, and 3 had 9. Attitudes toward the child from discovery of pregnancy to present regard are presented in Table 1. Apparently, at least in retrospect, most women were pleased with pregnancy. While no mother reported that she felt less kindly toward the child at the quickening, most indicated that their love for the child grew at this event. By birth, the mothers that initially regreted the child claimed to love their child more than most people they loved ("I loved him more than anyone else" was scored 1, while "I hated him more..." was scored 15), but differed significantly from the initially ecstatic mothers in claimed affection for the child ($t = 2.159$; $df = 43$; $p < .05$). At the time of interview no difference in claimed affection for the child between these two initially-divergent groups of mothers existed ($t = 1.32$; $df = 43$; ns). The "indifferent" and "glad" mothers fell in between the two extreme groups along all dimensions.

Insert Table 1 about here

The reactions of mothers who said that they would have had an abortion or actually tried to abort the child are presented in Table 2. Clearly, at the time of the interview, these children were held in the same regard as the "average" child, while there is a suggestion that children about whom such a decision might have been made or was unsuccessfully carried out were regarded somewhat less favorably than the average child at birth.

Insert Table 2 about here

Three mothers said that they "possibly" would have had their child adopted out if it entailed no expense to themselves. All the rest said they would not have adopted it out. All of the mothers who said that they would have had an abortion or actually attempted an abortion said they would not have adopted out the child.

Birth order was related to reported regard at birth and at time of interview, as is evident in Table 3. For both studies, the mean regard for children decreased as a direct function of birth order. As the first two categories corresponding to a score of "1" or "2" are exclusive (either the most loved or next-most loved person), some reduction with the addition of loved persons to one's phenomenal social space would appear almost inevitable. However, in one-child families, while a mean affect of 1.93 existed toward the child at birth, at the time of interview the mothers reported a mean affect of 1.62. In two, three or more child families, the mean estimate of love toward the first child declined from birth to the time of interview.

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Insert Table 3 about here

About half of all mothers changed their affective appraisals of their children (Table 1), and most of these appraisals (44 as compared to 22) were downward. Ten of our mothers provided data on two of their children. For these 10 mothers, at birth, the first child was reported as loved more than a latter child in five instances and lower in one instance; the second child was rated lower in one instance; third children were rated higher in two and lower in four; and fourth children lower in two instances. At the time of interview, the first child was rated higher in three instances and lower in one; second and third children were each rated higher in one and lower in one; while fourth children were rated lower in two comparisons.

Another indication of greater maternal love for the first child is revealed by comparing the frequency of rating the first child as the "most loved" as compared to the frequency of rating other children the "most loved." Of two or more child families, the first child was designated the "most loved" in 11 of 49 instances as compared to one second child being so defined out of a possible 12 second children. Of three or more child families, the first child was designated "most loved" in seven of 24 instances as compared to one of 24 for the third child.

Age-of-mother was related to maternal child-regard. Middle-aged women (those aged 40 to 55 inclusive, after Cameron, 1969) reported that their love for their child had increased since birth in six instances and declined in 21. Non-middle-aged women reported an increase in 14 instances and a decrease in nine ($\underline{X}^2 = 8.5$; $\underline{df} = 1$; $\underline{p} < .01$).

only 6% of the women reported less than love for their children. No matter what the initial attitude toward pregnancy, mothers currently claim to love their children to about the same degree as other mothers claim to love their children.

Do mothers favor the firstborn?

The Sears et al. (1957) study reported that there was a tendency for mothers to be more pleased with being pregnant with the first child than with later children. In the present study, clear evidence of maternal favoritism of the first child occurred in feelings at birth and feelings at time of interview. On the other hand, Lesko (1954), in a study of 40 two-child families, reported that professionals rated parental behavior toward the older child as being somewhat less "warm" than that evidenced toward the second child. We do not necessarily have an instance of a discrepancy between what people profess and what they do. Lesko's study of the impressions of professionals of the child-rearing patterns of 40 families seems at variance with the interviews of over 400 women in the Sears et al. and the present study. Lesko's report summates the impressions of both maternal and paternal behavior toward their children while an outside observer was present, while our study concerned itself with maternal attitudes. Possibly both studies validly reflect the current state of family life in the U.S. Perhaps mothers ordinarily favor the first child more than other children, but change their behavior to present a "fair" image when an outsider is present. Perhaps it indicates greater love when a mother is less "warm" to her child. Lesko admitted of considerable uncertainty in the interpretation of her findings--many dimensions were explored and only a few differences were found to be statistically significant. Neither set of data can be regarded as definitive--more representa-

pleasure at discovery, 16% said they were indifferent, and 8% were quite displeased. As these studies were done at different times, in different locations, and with different methodology, yet arrived at similar results, it seems likely that the "true" U.S. population parameters of self-professed feelings lie close to those reported in the two studies.

Do women change their feelings about their children from pregnancy to the present and, if so, how?

The only test of how a mother's affect toward the child might have changed since the initial discovery of pregnancy in the Sears et al. (1957) study consisted in the responses to the question of "whether it would have been better to wait longer before having this child?". Four percent of the mothers responded affirmatively and Sears et al. construed this as evidence that most of the initially-displeased mothers came to accept their child by the time it was in kindergarten. There are reasons besides active disliking of the child to think it "would have been better to wait for his birth," and the question itself presumes that the child would have been born in any case, so the conclusions of Sears et al. are not necessarily warranted by the answers of the mothers. In our study, it is clear that mothers who initially believed their pregnancy to be "the worst thing that ever happened to them" came to feel about the same degree of affection for their children as the mothers who were initially "ecstatic" about the pregnancy. For each of the four groups of mothers in our study ("regreters," "indifferent," "pleased," "ecstatic"), the course of love or affection for the child traced a common path. The quickening found most mothers starting to love their child-to-be more than they had initially, and birth found only a handful (5%) reporting less than love for the child. By the time they were interviewed, when most of the children were teen-agers or adults,

The mother's religion was related only to when she felt that life began. Eighty-five percent of the Catholics felt that life began at conception, as compared to slightly less than half of the Protestants and a third of the Jews. However, almost all of the women who did not believe that the child was alive at conception believed that life began at the quickening. Only six percent felt that the child's life began at birth. Four of the women claimed to have had an abortion; of these, three were Protestant, one gave no religion. Of the four women who claimed they would have had an abortion if it were possible or claimed to have tried to abort, three were Protestant and the other provided no religion.

Mothers reported that they felt a lower affection than love for 15 of the 309 children at birth (i.e., 5%) and for 19 (6%) of the children at the time of interview. Only two children were "hated," two were "disliked," two were "disliked a little," six were regarded with indifference "but would help him in time of trouble," and the rest were liked to some degree.

Discussion

How do women usually feel when they discover they are pregnant?

Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1957) reported interviews with 329 selected New England mothers who were asked how they felt when they found they were pregnant with their child who was now in kindergarten. Coders who later listened to their recorded remarks judged that about 78% had been pleased, about 15% had been uncertain, and about 10% had been displeased. Our results, based upon the mother's own choice of characterization of how she felt about her newly-discovered pregnancy, correspond rather closely to the Sears et al. findings. Seventy-six percent of our mothers indicated

tive samples will have to be both questioned and observed to settle the apparent discrepancy. Yet interviews with over 400 women in three locations would seem more likely to generate representative results than the observation of 40 mothers in one location.

Implications for the "liberalized abortion" debate

We feel that the implications of this study for the question of the adoption of more permissive abortion laws are direct and obvious. If the belief that "there is nothing worse than an unwanted child" lies behind a decision to make abortion more readily available, let it be noted that our results indicate that initially unwanted children end up no worse off as regards how mothers claim to feel about them than initially wanted children. Our study does not "settle the issue" of what happens to initially wanted vs. initially unwanted children. We only assessed what mothers claimed--not what they do, nor what the fathers do, nor how the children claim to feel, nor how the children are or claim to be treated. However, our study is an empirical beginning in a veritable sea of opinion and should not be taken lightly. General psychiatric opinion about the psychological effects of being a "wanted" or "unwanted" child holds that there is a much more unfavorable prognosis for the unwanted child. But the abortion decision is made before the child is, in fact, wanted or unwanted. The abortion decision must be made while the mother knows her child only in her imagination. The same kinds of considerations that have led psychiatric opinion to question the possible mental health of the "unwanted" child have led psychiatrists to deplore parent-child separation. Yet the empirical findings regarding the effects of parent-child separation are equivocal at best (Munro, 1969), and this circumstance enhances the possibility that psychiatric opinion is as errant or unsubstantiated in this case.

Women contemplating abortion must make the decision at the least favorable period insofar as the possible child's interests are concerned. Most women who were most regretful of the pregnancy now claim they would have the child again given the opportunity. While the sample of "attempted" or "wishful" aborters is small, most of these women now feel that they would have the child again. On the other side of the ledger, about one of every six mothers who were initially pleased with pregnancy would choose not to have the child again. Initial feelings about pregnancy are predictive of how a mother will eventually feel about her child to only a very limited degree. Most children are loved no matter how the mother felt initially, but the aborter-to-be must make her decision in the absence of such perspective. Her decision must be made quickly, and the chances of later regret loom large. Persons undergoing serious psychic disturbance are less apt to make judicious choices, and placing the burden of such a final and irreversible decision on a pregnant woman in distress would appear less than kind. Our study would indicate that, at the least, a woman who has an abortion will have lost someone she would have loved. At the worst, she must live with the knowledge that she has participated in killing a potential human.

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Table 1

Initial Reaction To Pregnancy and Affect Toward Child Through Present

felt about pregnancy	affect at birth	affect at time of interview	affect at quickening		affective changes between birth & present	have this child again?	
			stayed same	love grew		yes	no
regret (n= 10; 8%)	$\bar{X}$= 3.50	2.80			+= 3		
	S.D.= 2.23	1.05			-=2	6	3
	range 1-7	1-4	5	5			
	Md 3	3					
indifferent							
(n= 20; 16%)	$\bar{X}$= 2.75	2.45	3	17	-=5	15	5
	S.D.= 1.97	1.36			+=6		
	range 1-7	1-5					
	Md 2	2					
glad (n= 61; 48%)	$\bar{X}$= 2.15	2.47	16	42	-=23	51	10
	S.D.= 1.20	.86			+=10		
	range 1-6	1-4					
	Md 2	2					
ecstatic							
(n= 35; 28%)	$\bar{X}$= 1.94	2.26	1	30	+=3	29	2
	S.D.= 1.19	1.27			-=30		
	range 1-5	1-4					
	Md 1	2					

Table 2

Maternal Affection For Children

mother's age	number of siblings	child's age	affection at birth	affection at time of interview	would she have child again?	sibling number
--They Would Have Aborted If It Had Been Possible						
?	4	6 to 10	1	3	yes	1*
27	3	?	6	3	no	3
55	3	adult	7	2	yes	3
--They Tried Unsuccessfully to Abort						
?	4	6 to 10	1	3	yes	1*
38	3	10 to 16	1	4	yes	2

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*same child

Table 3

Love of Mothers as a Function of Ordinal Position of Child

Child #	n	Affect at Birth	Present Affect	Change
1	175	1.87	2.18	-.31
2	57	2.38	3.01	-.63
3	47	2.84	3.15	-.31
4 or more	29	2.93	3.24	-.31